

Refugee Students in American Classrooms

In the Refugee Act of 1980, P. L. No. 96-212, Congress codified and strengthened the United States' historic policy of aiding individuals fleeing persecution in their homelands. The Refugee Act of 1980 provided a formal definition of "refugee:"

"Any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality, and who is unable to return to, and is unable to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. "

What Have Refugee Families Been Through?

- Surviving of many years of civil conflict and political terror that killed thousands of people.
- Years spent in the chaos of war and refugee camps.
- Extremely stressful and traumatic life events, little control over these events.
- Unanticipated moving of extreme nature.
- Continuous anxiety about the family members left behind.
- Multiple abrupt disruptions to their daily routines.
- Loss of all possessions, familiar environment, family members, friends and neighbors.
- Need to survive and adjust in a completely new and unknown environment.

Refugee Students

Many refugees come from the culture that was **pre-literal and pre-technological**; their life has been very different from the lifestyles found in middle-income, industrialized cultures. Some of the refugee children were born in refugee camps; they have never known life outside of these camps. They may have had no formal education, no language training, and no experience with Western societies. These children are **tremendously dependent on the school system** for academic guidance because the parents of these children have had little or no exposure to formal education, and may be not literate in any language.

Refugee Parents

Stress the adults feel as a result of the traumas they have experienced often limits their effectiveness in traditional parental roles. Parents have a hard time establishing a sense of "normalcy" and setting up appropriate expectations and rules for their children following the move because of the unfamiliarity with the new culture where all aspects of life are unfamiliar and confusing. In addition to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, parents struggle to survive economically. Refugee parents are often unable to be helpful to their children with various aspects of school and school transitions. Within refugee families, as adults focus on employment, learning English, and taking care of the family's basic needs, the lives of the children can go unattended. ESL and mainstream teachers can and do play an extremely important role in the lives of newly resettled children.

How can ESL and mainstream teachers help refugee students with their psychological adjustment?

Whether or not refugee students have experienced extreme trauma, all are going through a **difficult and stressful psychological adjustment**. School administrators and teachers can ease this process by finding ways to provide support for these students.

With respect to coping with the transition, refugee students are unlikely to have access to the support and company of peers who went through similar experiences. This is made even more difficult because being "different" is not easy in U.S. schools, especially for middle- and high-school-age children. Teachers may need to give refugee students more attention and form **a mentoring relationship** with them.

Transition to another environment has been proven to be very stressful to children. Refugee students may not express their stress through words or may not even appear sad. However, changes in their behavior may be signals that the student is very upset and having difficulty adjusting. **It is very important not to ignore the behaviors that are inappropriate, and to help the student cope with new problems.** Help may be:

- 1) school-wide interventions that improve the social and learning environment for all students;
- 2) classroom interventions that improve the social and learning environment for all students in the class;
- 3) individualized interventions that provide academic support or other needed services to individual students.

Setting Expectations for Behavior

Since refugee children may not have had any former schooling it is **very difficult for refugee students to understand what is expected of them.** School is an extremely important setting for refugee children, because it is at school that they encounter the American culture, and are socialized into its norms. Most of the rules and norms in U.S. schools and classrooms are implicit (not explained but absorbed by children from their past school experience and from their surroundings). For refugee students, even the most simple and basic of the rules may need to be made explicit because of lack of experience with U.S. type of schooling.

While in other countries schools may rely on close monitoring, strict punishment, and discipline to manage student academic work and behavior, U.S. schools expect children to take responsibility for their own work and behavior. Refugee parents may assume that schools and teachers are closely monitoring their child's behavior and performance at school, while this "rule" or "norm" of being responsible for one's own work without constant monitoring is particularly subtle, yet extremely important. For these reasons, it is very important for schools and teachers to **be extremely explicit about rules and provide refugee children with extensive orientation to the classroom.** Explaining the rules to students orally and posting rules around the classroom can be helpful by allowing limited English speakers to hear them as well as see them in writing. Posters and posted slogans that clarify classroom rules will serve as ongoing reminders. Modeling a behavior by having the student watch someone else be rewarded for that behavior is another technique that works particularly well when the children's English language skills are poor.

Mental Health Issues

Another factor that makes understanding adjustment and mental health issues of refugee children more complex involves the fact that **many have suffered trauma.** There are several implications of this that may be helpful to teachers. First, it is important that teachers don't assume that it is their job to help children tell their story of trauma. Rather, the teacher can become aware that there may be a traumatic story that the student has to tell. If and when it does come up, the most important part to remember is that the student experiences trust and support while telling the story or trying to tell it. **Feeling understood** is particularly important for refugees (who so often feel that they cannot express themselves), and offers the student tremendous support.

Second, symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may be evident through observing the behavior of the student, as the student may "internalize" (seem tearful, sad, exceedingly shy), or "externalize" the symptoms (by getting into fights or displaying temper tantrums). When children externalize symptoms of PTSD, service providers may feel reluctant to discipline the student or to insist that the student follow rules of behavior in school and other settings, fearing that this will further traumatize the student. However, when done in a caring way, **setting limits and helping the student observe and monitor his/her own behavior** is extremely helpful to the refugee student, helps normalize the situation, and gives the student skills to cope with trauma as well as everyday life.

With refugee students and their parents, the need for individualized attention becomes obvious. **Children need counseling and guidance at school with decisions. Parents need information and guidance on raising children in new circumstances.**

References

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